

Article

# Shakti in Village India: Priestesses, *Sadhikas*, *Bhar Ladies*, *Ayes*, *Bhaktas*, Witches, and Bonga Girls

June McDaniel

Department of Religious Studies, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC 29424, USA; mcdanielj@cofc.edu

**Abstract:** In this paper, we shall examine some major religious roles for women in West Bengal, India, and the challenges they must face. Among the Santals, an Adivasi group, religious women must avoid being called witches, for women's power is seen as dangerous and religious social roles are traditionally forbidden to them. Some women have been called by deities to become trance mediums, colloquially known as '*bhar ladies*', and this role is generally not accepted by family members. Girls have had to undergo exorcisms by male healers to get them to renounce the gods that have called them to this role, while married women must deal with husbands who do not want their wives going into public trances. Many such women have learned tantric practices to control the trance possession. In rural areas, the combination of ascetic practices and stories known as *bratas* (*vratas*) are taught to young girls by female leaders called *ayes*. However, in more urban areas, this role has been taken over by male brahmin priests. We also see women in the *bhakti* tradition, who run ashrams and lead worship and who must deal with male devotees who question a woman's leadership abilities. All of these involve challenges, and many of these women have developed strategies to deal with the difficulties of being a religious influencer in their societies.

**Keywords:** shakti; women; India; West Bengal; Hinduism; saint; Santal; aye; *bratas* (*vratas*); *sadhika*; *bhakti*; tantra; ashram; witch; priestess; Adivasi; possession trance



**Citation:** McDaniel, June. 2023. Shakti in Village India: Priestesses, *Sadhikas*, *Bhar Ladies*, *Ayes*, *Bhaktas*, Witches, and Bonga Girls. *Religions* 14: 789. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14060789>

Academic Editor: David Peter Lawrence

Received: 16 February 2023

Revised: 14 April 2023

Accepted: 21 April 2023

Published: 14 June 2023



**Copyright:** © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

In urban Hindu society, some of the most important ways that women influence society are through the sayings and songs of female saints such as Mirabai and Anandamayi Ma. However, in the villages, women are rarely understood as saints. But there are other ways in which they can be viewed as influencers.

For women of tribal or *adivasi* groups, gods and goddesses live in nature or exist in supernatural worlds, and they can possess people and allow them to bless, to curse, and to predict the future. These deities are linked to place, and they are thus regional; different Adivasi groups will have different deities and ancestral spirits. The women may be ritual leaders, be possessed by goddesses, or act as local healers. However, tribal women with religious status are often accused of being witches, so they must develop protective strategies. We shall examine the situation of Santals here, with calls from Hindu deities which have become a way for women to get around the limitations of the local deities or *bongas* and to become accepted as priestesses.

In areas with strong traditions of yoga and tantra, we see women who are renunciants, variously called *stri gurus*, *sadhikas*, *tantrikas*, *matajis*, and occasionally *sannyasinis* and *yoginis*. They are spiritual guides and role models for their devotees. They primarily follow the goddess Kali in West Bengal. Many are travellers, moving between towns and villages, following dream commands and visiting sacred sites. Some become trance mediums at the goddess' wishes. The life of a tantric *sadhika* is a hard one, for they have no home or family, and they must fight the reputation for being both mad and immoral.

In rural areas with local Hindu deities, girls and women perform *bratas* (*vratas*) or ritual vows as ways to link themselves with gods and goddesses. These rituals are taught

to young girls, instilling the values that are important in the culture. The children learn to be helpful, obedient, reverent towards the deities, and less selfish and greedy. While in modern urban India there are male priests who teach *bratas* in the cities, in the villages it is the *ayes* or female elders who have this role. The *aye* becomes a role model for the girls, the fortunate woman whose husband and children are alive and healthy, who shows that she has divine blessings in her life. This role model is lost when male priests become teachers.

There are also more urban women who influence their family and community and who follow the *bhakti* or devotional tradition. They also follow traditional Hindu ideals, and some sing Kali kirtans and have devotional worship in their houses, while others run ashrams and initiate female novices. These are holy women who have dedicated themselves to religious lives, often with disciples who serve and learn from them. However, when we observe ashram life, male devotees do not easily accept women as heads of ashrams, even Shakta ones.

In this article, we shall look briefly at each of these categories and then discuss some examples of the role of religion in Bengali Shaktism or goddess worship. We shall see how women influence the society around them in each group, including both householder and renunciant practitioners, those who seek blessings, and those who seek *moksha*. All of these roles are for women who are viewed as holy women in West Bengal, women who have dedicated themselves to a religious life and seek to help others through their ritual practices.

## 2. Female Influencers among the Santals: Priestesses and Witches

Among the Indian tribals or *adivasis* (those who first lived on the land), we find a wide variety of notions about the nature of deities. There are generally not “high” gods and goddesses as we see in the pan-Indian brahmanical forms of Hinduism, but rather there are regional deities, intimately associated with the members of the tribe. Supernatural entities who are given offerings and worship include ghosts, ancestresses, water and plant essences, guardian spirits, and disease controllers. We see some overlap of tribal deities in the village gods or *gramadevatas* of village Hinduism. There is no sharp differentiation between the gods and goddesses of the Adivasis and those of folk Hinduism. Rather than a polarity, we see a continuum, for both traditions worship many deities in common.

Such deities are regional, associated with specific places, temples, fields, and streams. The Kali of one village is not the same as the next village’s Kali. One Chandi gives good hunting, another Chandi cures disease. These gods and goddesses are specific to a person’s tribal or caste group, extended family, village, or neighborhood. Worship is for a specific end: fertility, good harvest, good weather, or cures for diseases. If local goddesses are not worshiped, it is well known that they may get irritable, especially when they get hungry.

Within the Santal tribal group, the local deities are called *bongas*. Bongas fall into several categories: village spirits, hill spirits, ancestor spirits, the deity of agriculture, mischievous spirits such as Baghut Bonga (the tiger spirit), household deities, and the secret deity of the family or subclan. We also have women’s groups of singers and dancers as well as herbal healers. However, men’s religion is separate, and women who try to practice men’s religion and worship the bongas may be accused of being witches. Santal men have traditionally justified their exclusion of women from the supernatural world by their claims of women’s greater powers and the tendency for women with religious power to become evil. As A. B. Chaudhuri stated of the Santal *mahans* (witch-finders):

The *mahans* do not see anything wrong in forbidding the womenfolk from worship of the Gods or Bongas. In their reckoning, women are more powerful in matters of mantras . . . than men, and in the event of their being allowed to worship the Gods or Bongas, they would acquire unwarranted ‘power’, and everybody knows that women can do harm on account of jealousy, a very strong motive-force in women (Chaudhuri 1987, p. 67).

This belief in women’s greater power which must be kept in check is widespread in India.

The Santals have an interesting origin myth about witches and women's power, dealing with the great mountain god Marang Buru. It also explains why magic is good if performed by men and bad if performed by women, based on a tale of a competition between men and women. According to the story:

In the beginning, the tribal women dominated the men. The men resented this, and they decided at a meeting that they should seek the blessings of Marang Buru and learn magic (*jadu*) so that they would be able to control the women. They sought Marang Buru, and [they] asked him to teach them magic. Marang Buru agreed on one condition, each man must give him a Sal leaf marked with his own blood. The men did not like this idea, and they told Marang Buru that they would discuss it and return the following evening. They did not know that the women had followed them and overheard the conversation.

Back at the village, the women indulged the men, served them with good food and large amounts of rice beer, and made them comfortable at night and throughout the following day. The men decided that there was no need to go [back] to Marang Buru, as the women seemed to have found their proper place simply by the god's grace.

However, that evening the women gathered together and decided to go to Marang Buru and learn magic themselves. Since he had promised magical teachings to the men, they would disguise themselves as men to go to him, and they put on beards and moustaches made of goat's hair as well as male dress. The women were willing to give him leaves marked with their blood, and Marang Buru taught them about magic. They returned home to the men and again took up their dominant position.

The unhappy men returned to Marang Buru, and they told him that they had never returned to learn magic from him. Marang Buru realized that he had been tricked, and he told the men that the women had gained his knowledge by deceit. Therefore, he would teach men the ability to find witches, and the Jans (witch-finders) would be able to find the Dans (witches) by this method. Because the women had learned magical knowledge by deceit, it became destructive if a woman used it (Ibid, pp. 100–2).

According to a variant of this story, the men had become lazy and spent their time drinking and feasting, and they left the burden of running the family to the women. The women became angry and lost respect for the men, so the men sought a way to control the women. For this reason, they went to Marang Buru (Troisi 1979).

Thus, women have been forbidden from learning men's forms of religion and magic out of fear of women's power. However, while Santal women cannot worship the gods, they can worship the nature goddesses. Jaher Era is the most important goddess of the Santal pantheon, the Lady of the Sacred Grove. Her name signifies "fertile area", and she is often called a mother goddess or ancestress (Jaher Budhi).<sup>1</sup> Some Santals say that she was the first daughter of Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Burhi, the first couple. Like the Hindu forms of the goddess Chandi, she will sometimes stay in a stone on a square altar, which is anointed with oil and vermillion. She is worshipped for good crops and in times of agricultural danger, and people seek her grace and protection for happiness and health. Traditionally, she possesses Santal women at certain ritual times, such as the Erok Sim festival after the spring Baha or New Year's feast. Women go to the sacred grove (*Jaher Than*) and sing songs to Jaher Era, and several may be possessed by her.

While most Adivasi people worship the deities of their own tribal groups, some include the deities of others. In Midnapore, we see both Adivasi and Hindu folk goddesses who are called Budi Ma or Buri Ma. In modern Bengali, *budi* means "old woman", but the Adivasi meaning of the term is "ancestress", the woman who is old because she originated the group. She is not merely old but ancient and revered for her age and power. Some of these older goddesses are associated with trees (such as Vana Durga or Durga of the forests and Budi Ma or Rupasi who dwells in the *sheora* tree). This is different from popular Hinduism, which tends to emphasize goddesses who are young and beautiful. In Adivasi thought, a woman's age shows her knowledge of life.

The Old Lady goddess can possess women both young and old. Among the tribal Santals and Oraons, the Old Lady of the Grove (known as Jair Budhi or Sarna Burhi) may

jump from one dancer to another, uniting them in a shared divine identity. Such events usually occur at the Sarna Darma or sacred grove in the spring during the Sarhul festival, when the *sal* trees are in blossom. This festival is especially popular in the recently created state of Jharkhand.<sup>2</sup> The Old Lady of the Grove is said to have her long white hair reflected in the white blossoms of the *sal* trees, and the dancing of girls and women while possessed is believed to motivate the goddess to bring rain and good crops.

There are often female dance leaders who guide the female dancers. Group possession in the villages is not usually marked by supernatural events, such as spiritual healing or prediction of the future, but rather by a heightened sense of group unity and happiness among the women. The groups of men and women dance separately, and the goddess usually possesses one group of dancers at a time (McDaniel 2004). The Sarhul festival is important, for it celebrates the marriage of heaven and earth with the sacred grove as a source of blessings and fertility.<sup>3</sup> However, women are still forbidden from gaining the knowledge of the *bongas* or deities, for the highest male *bongas* speak only to men, and women cannot be Santal priests. Yet if Hindu goddesses call Santal women to be devotees, they can become Hindu priestesses.

According to one Santal informant interviewed, Parvati Soren, Hindu goddesses can come and call women in dreams to be priestesses and devotees. Parvati grew up in her village in Birbhum following traditional Santal rules for women. However, several Hindu goddesses called her in dreams and visions to be their worshipper. She struggled against their desires, but she would be punished with illness and bad luck if she resisted them. She now performs ritual worship to the Hindu snake goddess Manasa as well as other Hindu deities such as Kali and Durga. She does not worship the Santal *bongas*. She is a Santal healer and priestess with long matted hair and a tribal woman who has incorporated Hindu deities into her worship. She learned to give medicines and blessings from revelations which came during trance states (Ibid, pp. 54–58). She is valued in the neighboring villages for her healing skills with roots and plants. She has been able to avoid the Santal condemnation of female religious leaders by following the commands of Hindu goddesses. As she stated,

I did not worship Manasa when I was young. But after I got married, I got a fever, and I was very ill. I could not leave my bed from the month of Caitra to the month of Asar (four months). I was so sick that I couldn't eat even rice or water because my body was in great pain.

When I was in a delirious state, I would speak continually, often to the goddess Manasa. She would come to visit me, and I could see her. I could see other goddesses and gods too, especially Kali. I would worship them while I was unconscious. Sometimes when I would look out from my bed, I would see sacred stones appear. When I would get up to put cow dung on the floor, stones would appear there.<sup>4</sup> I asked Manasa and Kali where these stones were coming from, but they did not tell me. Urdesi (a local elder) told me that gods were staying within me and that I should serve them. I saw Manasa most frequently, and eventually I began to worship her. My health improved, but my hair began to become matted . . . Now I perform *pujas* to Manasa, and sometimes people come to me for medicine, which I give them . . .

Why do I worship Manasa and not the Santal gods? Manasa came to me, only the gods know why. The goddess played a game with me. She made my hair get matted and knotted, so that it was huge and heavy like honeycombs. However, I finally cut off some of them because they were so hot. Manasa got angry at me for cutting off the matted hair and she brought back my fever . . .

Manasa helps me to cure people, and I give them roots which make them better. I ask Manasa what to do. I say to her, "You have made me worship you, now tell me what to do". Then Manasa will appear to me and tell me which roots to use. She tells me the names of the roots, and then I go and find them and give them to

the people. I give them in her name, but I don't chant any mantras over them. If a brahmin priest had worshipped and given medicine, he would chant mantras, but for us there are no mantras. Sometimes I will say the names of various gods: Manasa, Krishna, Narayan, Kali, Durga, Dharma Deva. I do not mention the names of Santal gods, for worshipping them was forbidden by Manasa. She does not like me to worship other gods besides herself.

This strategy of Santal women being called by Hindu goddesses has recently been discussed by the anthropologist Marine Carrin (see ([Carrin 2018](#))). Parvati's experiences bear out her observations. Carrin emphasized that the women who become priestesses are generally those dislodged from kinship networks and thus excluded from society (this often occurs due to marriages forbidden by tribal rules or due to early widowhood). These women cannot gain status from traditional initiation, for Santal culture forbids direct transmission of spiritual knowledge from male priests to women, as the women are believed to be weaker than men, more subject to greed and envy, and more likely to be corrupted by the religious powers they gain. However, having a deity choose to visit the woman in a dream or trance and give knowledge is allowed. The priestess can then take a Shakta guru, be given an amulet and a new name, and also have new deities to worship (*Ibid*, p. 23). As the call comes from a deity, people hesitate to condemn or forbid it.

This call is often chaotic, with visions and strange dreams, and the woman's hair becomes matted into long *jata* (which is said to emit flames at night, for the deity weaves the locks with mantras). The future priestess must learn to control her trance states; in one case described by Carrin, when the woman grasped a trident (*trishul*) of the god Shiva, she started to gain control over the visions. She performed ascetic practices such as fasting, icy baths, and firewalking, and the trident became a staff to chase away witches and evil spirits. She was able to limit her trances to Tuesdays and Fridays, and her husband became her celibate devotee (*Ibid*, p. 42). This is quite exceptional for a Santal couple, though it would be familiar for practitioners of Shakta Hinduism. In the well-known story of the Bengali saint Anandamayi Ma, her husband also became her celibate disciple and saw her as divine.

This differs markedly from the typically allowed religious roles for women among the Santals. The roles of Santal female influencers are limited because of the fear of witches and also because of fear of female *bongas*. *Bongas* are believed to interact with human beings through supernatural dreams and visions, and they are said to be attractive to humans.<sup>5</sup> Female *bongas* or “*bonga* girls” (as the early ethnographers called them) are often said to become the lovers or wives of human beings. Many stories involve female *bongas* who are attracted by the strength and ability of young Santal men. These stories tend to follow themes often found in European fairy lore: the *bonga* girl lives in nature (in hills, rivers, lakes, trees, and caves) and may marry human men as long as the man does not perform a forbidden act (hitting her, touching her with his foot, or being frightened at events at her parents' house). She brings wealth, children, and happiness to her marriage, but sooner or later the human husband breaks the taboo and she leaves immediately. Sometimes she will teach supernatural skills to her Santal mate, as we see in a song:

From the pool, the pool  
two *bonga* girls came up  
and we have learnt from them  
the ways of magic ([Archer 1974](#)).

In a story described by the missionary P. O. Bodding, one such couple has a fight, and the husband kicks the female *bonga*, violating the taboo. She takes her two children out into the field and it blazes with light, and they disappear. The husband's parents say that they are lucky that she didn't eat them (thus seeing her as a witch), but the husband is sad to see her go. His family again becomes poor.<sup>6</sup>

Some *bonga* girls are specifically water *bongas*, much like the mermaids of European folklore. They attract human men, and they put a chain like a hair around their legs and

pull them into the water. Others are invisible and seduce men at night, or they appear in the guise of an ordinary girl (such as a female relative or the headman's daughter). The forest bongas may have homes in the jungle or underground, and these homes have been described in stories as looking like the homes of princes or, more recently, Europeans (sahibs). When the village boy visits, it is full of attractive food and furniture, but when he leaves, the food turns into cow dung and *meral* leaves and the furniture becomes coiled snakes. The household pets transform themselves into leopards and tigers.

This theme of environmental transformation is also seen in European fairy lore; the great palace seen by the human midwife is revealed after the birth of the fairy child to be a dank cave full of old leaves and sticks, and the beautiful environment disappears. What this shows is that men must fear the 'bonga girls' because of their powers of illusion.

When human men marry female *bongas*, there may sometimes be a positive result, though it is an ambiguous and often dangerous situation. There may be tension between the 'bonga girl' and the human wife (unless the wife is possessed by the *bonga*, which occasionally is believed to happen). However, we hear more cases of problems for the reverse situation, for the women who marry male *bongas* are usually called witches, the "negative female influencers" of the group.

The Santal witch (*dan* or *dain*) is believed to have the evil eye which can curse and to be able to cover great distances overnight by flying on an uprooted tree which can plant itself at her will. She can change forms in order to collect objects from the houses of her victims and influence *bongas* by her mantras and set them against people. She can cause disease and then prevent recovery of patients by putting small objects invisibly into the patient's body. Her magical spells may be called by the pan-Indian word for magic *jadu* or by the Santali term *fuskin* or *phukrin*.

There are debates whether all women have the potential to become witches or whether only some women have this ability and whether it is ever possible for a man to become a witch. One myth relates the origin of witches to the fact that only men can eat the sacrifices to the gods; a hungry girl stole some of the uneaten meat sacrificed to a *bonga* and ate it, and the *bonga* took possession of her and made her continuously hungry for meat. She cried continuously. He suggested to her mother that she cut a slice of flesh from the hip of her sleeping husband and that this would satisfy her daughter. Her husband would not die, and he would never know (such eating of flesh by witches seems to be unfelt and invisible). She did this, and the daughter was satisfied. The mother and daughter then became witches.<sup>7</sup> Thus, witchcraft began with the violation of a religious ritual.

Witches are said to have red eyes and to frighten children. Witches are members of a secret society, some with specialization such as the *dan dhakin* (who can put the evil eye on others) and the *dan jugin* (who knows sorcery and can influence many bongas). Witches have the power of the evil eye, which they develop by practice (as opposed to the spontaneous *nazar* or evil eye). They also have the power of the evil mouth (their spells come true).

Witches can be of any age, even little girls, if they can remember the witch-songs (*jharni*) by which they learn the techniques of witchcraft (such teaching is only by oral tradition). Learning occurs when women and girls leave their houses secretly at night to go off to a deserted field or burning ground. Their town falls into a magical sleep when they leave on a new moon night, walking out of their houses naked. They walk holding a tiger's skull with a witch-light on top of it or their fingers shine with fire when they snap them. The village dogs are also sprinkled with magical water to keep them quiet. According to some Santals, an illusory image of the woman remains lying in bed while her real self leaves. Others say her spirit leaves, but her body stays in the house.

Some Santals report seeing witches at night, in the company of others, dancing or performing rituals at the Sacred Grove or at other deserted places. Witches are usually believed to be trained under some older witch, at night in the jungle or cremation grounds. They may dance naked, wearing only belts of grass or broom, and steal objects with which to perform spells. A witch may walk on her head and carry lights on her feet, or she may

visit the house of a victim in the form of a cat or insect. She could then take away the victim, remove and eat various body parts, and return the victim to the house without anybody knowing.

Santal witch stories often deal with frustrated appetites, and one frequent theme in the Santal witch stories is what we might call visionary cannibalism. Witches gain the ability to see the person's internal organs, especially the liver, lungs, and heart. The victim's body becomes transparent to their gaze. Once these internal organs become visible to the witch, she is attracted to them and wants to eat them. By using some undescribed power, she is able to extract these organs without cutting the physical body of the victim, cook the organs, and devour them. After the initial extraction of organs, the victims are unaware of any problem and go about their normal lives. Sometimes another object is inserted in the place of the missing organ.

However, after a few days or weeks, the victim starts to feel tired and weak and spiral down towards death. If a witchfinder or *janguru* can find the witch and persuade her to return the organs, then the person can recover. If the whole organ has been eaten, the victim's soul cannot return, but if a part of the organ has been left over, it can be transplanted and the soul can be relocated. Once the name of the witch was known, that person was often beaten, fined, driven from the community, and not infrequently killed. Witches in Santal society were invariably female, while the witch-finders were male.

Because all women have the potential to become witches, one must be careful not to allow them access to any situation of religious power or influence. Thus, witches may be seen as 'negative female religious influencers' among the Santal, a situation which has continued into the twentieth century.

However, the role of witchcraft has changed over time, gaining a greater political focus, and accusations of witchcraft have come to be used for political scapegoats. As an example, in the Bengali newspaper *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, an article was titled "Three women beaten for 'witchcraft'". Two young tribal girls and their mother were severely beaten by CPIM supporters (supporters of the Communist Party of India, Marxist) in Midnapore district. They were members of a rival political group, the DYFI, who had protested against local communist leaders demanding percentages of their wages. After an unsuccessful attempt at rape and ordered ostracism by the village, the local CPIM leader had the women beaten for witchcraft.<sup>8</sup>

According to Jharkhand's 2001 Prevention of Witch-Hunting Act (*Dayan Pratha*), the punishment for identifying a woman as a witch is imprisonment for up to three months and/or a fine of INR 1000. Similarly, causing harm to anyone in the name of witchcraft can lead to imprisonment for up to six months and/or a fine of INR 2000. Many Santals live in what is now Jharkhand, and a 2016 article notes that many people ignore the anti-witchcraft laws.<sup>9</sup> Women are still blamed for local problems and attacked. As is unfortunately the case in many countries, accusations of religious misbehavior are often a cover for persecution with more social, political, and economic bases.

Thus, there is little room for positive female influence in the Santal society, which has been called by ethnographers 'a men's religion'. Women must have a special call from Hindu deities to escape the traditional gender limitations of Santal culture. However, even within Hinduism, it can be difficult for a woman who has a call from a deity to follow a religious life.

### 3. *Sadhikas, Yoginis, and Shakta Tantric Female Influencers*

While many people are familiar with male *sadhus* in India, men who have renounced the world to pursue a spiritual life of meditation, there are also women who have chosen this path, popularly called *sadhikas* in West Bengal.

Many *sadhikas* have chosen to follow a Shakta tantric path, in which the goddess is worshipped with special ritual techniques, especially *bjia* mantras and mandalas. While most tantric texts are written from a male perspective, there is room in the tantric tradition for female practitioners. Tantric texts describe three major roles for women: as ritual

incarnations of the goddess, as ritual consorts for sexual *sadhana*, and as female gurus. These may be seen in detail in texts such as the *Kularnava Tantra*, a major text for Bengali Shakta tantrikas.

However, women's roles in tantric practice are much broader than these three roles. We see various types of holy women who have incorporated tantric practices into their ritual practices: the woman who has renounced worldly life (*sannyasini*), the woman who is dedicated to celibacy, service, and obedience to a tradition and who follows a guru and lives in an ashram (*brahmacarini*), the woman who practices yoga, especially kundalini yoga (*yogini*), and the woman who has married but has left her husband to pursue a spiritual life (*grihi sadhika*). A holy woman may be a devotee of Kali or Tara and worship the goddess with tantric mantras and mandalas, or she may get possessed by Kali as a vocation (she is then colloquially called a *bhar-lady*). The female tantrika may also be a wife who practices tantric sexual ritual as a part of her marriage, in obedience to her husband and guru, or a professional ritual partner in tantric sexual practice. She may be a female teacher (*stri-guru*), usually celibate and head of a group of devotees or an ashram, whose songs and poems are dedicated to the goddess Kali in her many forms. She may also be a widow or celibate wife, whose practice involves ritual tantric worship (*puja*) or whose practice involves a mixture of devotional love of a goddess (*bhakti*) and tantric ritual.

The typical roles for women described in tantric texts tend to follow an exaggerated style; the images of women are strongly sexual, or idealized, or both. One does not often get the sense of real women used as models for textual ritual. The *Kularnava Tantra* states that the tantric consort or *kula* woman must be beautiful, young, pious, devoted to her guru and god, always smiling, pleasing, and without jealousy, among other qualities (Das 1383, my translation). A *kula* woman cannot be unattractive or old or sleepy, and she cannot feel desire or argue with her partner; these disqualify her from tantric practice, even if she has been initiated (Ibid, VII, 49–51, my translation). There are few physical women who fit all of these ideals (they are never sleepy and they never grow old?).

Some tantric texts say that women can be tantric gurus and that a practitioner's mother makes the best guru (this is different from brahmanical Hinduism, in which male gurus are either required or preferred). A woman may also be knowledgeable as a tantric consort, whether she is the tantrika's wife or the wife of another man, a courtesan or laundrywoman or dancer or fisherwoman, a woman who sells meat or works with leather. Some tantras encourage the worship of goddesses within living women and girls, for women may incarnate Shakti. Some tantras say that one must never harm a woman or look down upon her or even hit her with a flower. In the *Kali Tantra*, women are respected, especially the *kula*-woman (a female tantric practitioner of the *kula marga*):

5. (The practitioner) should imagine the whole world as female (*strimaya*), and he should also think of himself as female . . . When he sees a *kula*-woman, he should bow [to her] with reverence . . .

7. If by good fortune he should encounter a *kula*-woman, he should mentally worship (perform *puja* to) her.

8. He should bow respectfully before a young girl, a teenaged girl, an old woman, or a young woman, even if she is ill-tempered, ugly, or bad.

9. Women should never be beaten, insulted, or cheated and should never be treated badly. If a person does treat a woman badly, he will be unable to attain success [in his practice].

10. Women are deities, women are the life force (*prana*), women are beauty (or the ornaments of life, *alamkara*) . . . (Smrititirtha 1388, my translation).

When a woman is chosen to be a ritual incarnation of the goddess, she is given offerings and ritual worship. Sometimes a young girl is worshiped (in *kumari puja*), and sometimes a mature woman is the object of worship (in *stri puja* or *sakti puja*). *Kumari puja* is popularly performed during the annual holiday of Durga Puja; young girls are brought to the altar and given candy, jewelry, and new clothing, and people sing hymns to them, recognizing the goddess within them. Goddesses may ritually dwell almost anywhere-

from trees to corpses. However, because the human woman has her own feminine power or *sakti*, she is an especially appropriate place for a goddess to dwell.

There are also female tantric gurus, inspired by the goddess, and they may teach men ritual practices in certain situations. Such women are rarely mentioned in the texts; there is greater emphasis upon male teachers. However, many serve as influencers; perhaps the most well-known is the Bhairavi Brahmani, who instructed the Bengali saint Ramakrishna Paramahamsa.

One type of tantric holy woman rarely studied is the woman who had been married (*grihi sadhika*) but left her husband and family. These women had lower status than celibate yoginis, but often had disciples. They might grow up in Bengali villages, but would wander through India, practicing tantric meditation and worship, and live at temples or ashrams. Some holy women would go into states of possession by the goddess Kali, induced by chanting tantric *bija* mantras, drumming, incense, or singing hymns to the goddess. Tantra for them is ritual action, worship, and possession, usually in response to a call by the goddess. The goal of tantra was to follow the goddess' will within renunciant life.

Most female tantrikas interviewed were not only celibate, but insistently so. Several said that tantric meditation involves purity and concentration and that desire would be a distraction and would cause them to fall.

Much literature on tantra has sensationalized the sexual aspects of tantra, making it the one necessary thing. However, sexual ritual is clearly not necessary or even common among tantrikas. Women tantrikas spoke of it as unimportant. Most said it was rarely practiced, and some said that such practices were almost never performed, like the large Vedic sacrifices performed by kings long ago. Some women tantrikas have told me that the individual sexual ritual is really only for men, who have difficulty controlling their instincts, and that it is rarely useful or necessary for woman. Because of the way Indian girls are brought up, it is rare to find any who cannot control their instincts; Indian sons are indulged and sometimes even spoiled, while Indian daughters are taught to give the best food and toys to their brothers. Indian women thus learn to sacrifice their desires at an early age. As the female tantrikas say, sexual rituals are for people who are weak rather than strong, and weak people do not belong at the rituals of the burning ground. In this case, they understand women to be stronger than men because women have learned renunciation at an early age, while many men have had little experience of it.

Women following the tantric path must prove themselves in different ways than male practitioners. Men can take initiation and perform rituals, and this is understood by the family and community. However, families often resist having their wives and daughters become tantrikas, even rather violently.

One tantrika interviewed was Lakshmi Ma, a muscular woman with long *jata* (matted hair) which reached the floor. She would wear a red sari and carry a large iron Shiva trident. She had been married (and was thus technically a *grihi sadhika*) and had children, but she had left that life, and now she was a wandering holy woman who worshiped the goddess Tara Ma (considered in Bengal to be a form of Kali).

She said that she had visions of the goddess as a child, when she was seven or eight years old. She used to listen to stories about Shakta saints, but she was unable to go to school. She learned to read Bengali from a friend. She was married in an arranged marriage when she was fifteen years old. Her husband was much older and a disciple of a guru named Naga Baba. The guru told him to marry, and he described a girl of Lakshmi's appearance as his intended wife. After they were married, she continued to have religious visions of Shiva and Durga and Kali.

However, a new wife having visions was not acceptable for her husband's family. Her in-laws thought that she was possessed by evil spirits, and they called an exorcist who tied her up with ropes and started burning her. This lasted for a week, but she didn't die, and she believed that this was due to the blessings of the goddess. She was able to show me the scarring on her legs from the fire that the exorcist burned between them (there were thick, permanent scars), and she said that he put chicken bones up her nose until she bled. Then

they bound her with iron chains, but she was somehow able to escape and run away to the temples of Shiva and Kali. After a week, the exorcist gave up and declared that since there was no change in her claims, perhaps her religious calls really did come from the gods.

Meanwhile, the torture drove her to madness. Her relatives cut off her *jata*, and she tore off her clothes and ran through the streets. She rarely ate, and her life was full of visions. The god Shiva came and told her not to put oil in her hair and not to use a brush and to visit his temples. She ran away from the house, but her husband found her and brought her back. He would pour a hundred cups of water on her head, and she would return to normal for a while.

Lakshmi said that the goddess was always with her, but she takes different forms. She said that she gets possessed by Kali on Kali Puja, but at other times, the goddess is present without rituals being performed. She said that she had seen gods and ghosts, but she was only frightened of human beings.

She took various initiations in her wanderings, and her in-laws seem to have given up trying to get her to stay in the house like a normal daughter-in-law. Her husband followed her, coming to serve her, and eventually he became a *sadhu* (holy person). She gave blessings and healings, enough of which were successful to legitimize her claim to be loved by the goddess Tara Ma (Kali). She gained a reputation in Kolkata as a Kali devotee and healer, with her visions being used to help others.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, this is not an easy life. To become accepted as a true visionary, Lakshmi Ma had to be rejected by her family, tortured with exorcism, and live a life of wandering until she was accepted by the community. Such lives are particularly difficult for women, who have no money and no stable place to sleep at night. While it is considered a bad act to attack a holy woman, this does not stop all men, especially if the *sadhika* is attractive. Thus, we see the importance of the trident she carries, both for religious symbolism and as a weapon of self-defense against male sexual attacks. It also shows the importance of having disciples or a religious community around her to live safely. All of these are challenges for women who feel called to a tantric path of dedication to the goddess.

In the state of possession trance or *bhar*, the goddess is understood to come down to her devotee to develop a relationship and later to help solve problems. When this happens, possession can become a career track. These women become specialists, going into trance once a week and having a group of devotees and an audience who pay with donations.<sup>11</sup> Such specialists are influencers usually contacted for healing stubborn diseases and for predicting the outcomes of relationships, job possibilities, and lawsuits.

It is understood to be a difficult career to enter, for the inner presence of a goddess is not easily accepted psychologically, and there are often trances, breakdowns, periods of madness, and mood swings in the person's life. People who do seek to experience possession states may use vermillion from a statue of Kali or pieces of bone and ash from the burning ground, in order to attract the goddess. However, it is believed by most Shaktas that such states cannot be generated by human will; they are a gift of the goddess according to her will.

There is usually a set model for possession; the person receives a dream or 'prophetic call' from a god or goddess who wants to be worshiped, appearing in visions and demanding obedience from the woman. If she will not perform the worship, the god or goddess then possesses the reluctant devotee. The woman is pursued psychologically by the deity until she gives in and is willing to form a relationship with the deity. Unless the person is chosen by the deity, this is not a possible career.

In some cases, a person is understood to be possessed by more than one deity. One holy woman that I interviewed outside of Kolkata, Yogeshvari Devi, had several possessing personalities. Her major goddess was Kali, and while possessed by her, she spoke in a female voice. However, on a few occasions, she was possessed by the god Shiva and then spoke in a deep male voice. In her case, the possession was associated with healing diseases and with materialization of objects. She was initially called by the goddess and possessed against her will, but she came to accept the states and chose to be possessed voluntarily. In

order to evoke a trance, she would sit down to meditate, visualizing a blue light. When the light turned yellow and disappeared, her normal consciousness disappeared and the deities would take over. However, sometimes a trance came spontaneously, especially when she was confronted with a person in need of healing. She took no credit for materializations, saying that the deities acted and she did nothing.

However, in interviews, her disciples spoke of a number of miraculous acts which would occur during trances. They said that she would materialize medicine, amulets, and sacred food (*prasad*), often food which had been offered to the goddess in a different town. She would also speak in tongues (especially in Sanskrit, a sacred and mysterious language in the folk tradition), have mantras appearing on her body (in both Bengali and Devanagari script), even on her nails, and the air around her would smell of flowers and incense. She would dance in trance state, and red *sindur* powder would fall from her hands, and her matted hair would drip honey. She was said to be immune to pain in these states, and several disciples said that they saw light around her.<sup>12</sup>

Such a possession trance is generally described by the people involved as pleasurable or like a dream-state. There is often no memory of the events or only a hazy memory (as one holy woman said, “Don’t ask me what happens what I get possessed, I never know- ask my disciples, they keep track of such things”). Another woman who often became possessed spoke of the goddess as a “quiet darkness” which descended upon her, removing all pain. Her ordinary personality fell asleep or watched what went on from a distance. While *bhar* is considered to be a lower form of trance, women in this state can still act as influencers for the community. Sometimes they predict the future and give advice on village problems, speaking in the voice of the goddess; or they may bless candy through her presence, which is then distributed to the children in the area. Village women may sometimes have private sessions with the trance medium, in which she gives advice on personal problems as well.

Possession trance by the goddess is generally understood as a lower state of religious experience, by people whose soul has not been developed enough to remain conscious while the goddess descends. There is a higher state called *mahabhava* or *bhava* for short (or sometimes *brahmajnana* in a strictly tantric context), which is found in devotees whose tantric meditation and bhakti devotion is combined with yogic knowledge. While women in possession trance influence society by bringing the goddess’ blessings and words, the female influencers in states of *mahabhava* tend to be the leaders of groups and highly respected in society.

#### 4. The *Bratas*

##### 4.1. Ayes and Bratas: Female Influencers in Rural Bengal

While there are many rituals and celebrations for women in Bengali villages, one of the most popular is the performance of *bratas* (or in Sanskrit, *vratas*). The term refers to religious practice intended to help the practitioner or another person. It usually involves the observance of certain restrictions for a prescribed period, such as avoiding certain foods or actions, sleeping on the floor, or creating models of desired events as well as hearing or reading a story which tells the meaning and origin of the practice (*brata-katha*). These rituals may be associated with days of the week, months, or dark or light fortnights of the moon or holidays such as Durga Puja. It is a personal practice, which may involve personal prayer, chanting, reading of spiritual texts, a social get-together of friends and family, or silent meditation. While men can perform *bratas* and they are described in many older Sanskrit texts as doing so, in rural Bengal, it is women who are the primary performers of *brata* rituals.

In rural *brata* stories, women are often the heroines; they save their families from danger, and they motivate gods to help the souls of their selfish and unworthy husbands escape from the hell worlds. *Bratas* do not bring enlightenment; they are intended to bring blessings in the physical world. Some *bratas* derive from classical brahmanical sources, the Vedas and puranas and epics and *dharma shashtra* texts. These often have male gods and male figures as dominant in the stories. Others, which are generally more popular and

local, are handed down by oral tradition and performed by village women. These tend to come from folktales, in which goddesses come down to reveal their rituals to help people who are in trouble. There are also *bratas* which combine these elements.

A popular theme is the story of a person who accidentally or deliberately offends a goddess, who then comes down to show her anger to the offender. The story then shows the plight of the proud or ignorant person and the ways that the behavior can be forgiven and harmony can be restored. These revealed teachings become the bases of the later *brata* practice.

It is generally married women who instruct young girls about *brata* rituals. The instructor or *aye* is a woman whose life is understood as fortunate; her husband and children are alive, she has enough food, and she is respected by others. She teaches young girls from the age of five years on, who are taught to pick flowers, sculpt small statues, and draw decorative *alpana* pictures on the floor or entrance to the house. Each *brata* has its own *alpana* design or pattern, which is usually drawn in white clay and rice powder. Some *alpana* pictures give protection from danger, others give blessings, and yet others symbolize a desired goal. Many are decorated with extra images, and a small pot (with water and a twig) may be placed in the center of the design to represent the presence of the deity.

While more classical, brahmanical style of *bratas* hand down teachings which are understood as eternal, revealing a teaching which has always been present, folk *bratas* are often stories of direct revelation, usually from a goddess to a girl or woman. While many classical *bratas* require a Brahmin priest and he requires payment, folk *bratas* do not require a priest's presence and the *aye* does not require payment. Any fortunate married woman can be understood as a *brata* priestess or *aye* of her village.

The rituals and fasts use imagery of plants and animals and familiar objects to show the girl how to be a virtuous woman, and good and evil people are contrasted and rewarded and punished by the goddesses in the stories. They are an alternative sort of schooling for girls who may not have very much formal education.

According to SK Ray, the *bratas* have retained their importance for women. As he states:

The fundamental religion in which the Bengalis are “born and brought up” is called *brata*. It is a domestic form of religion and apparently not associated with temple service. *Bratas* are performed exclusively by womenfolk with a view to fulfilling their aspirations by means of magical rites. It can be performed by a single person, or by the “elders in assembly” of five married women (Ray 1961).

The married woman (*aye*) is the *brata* priestess of her household, in Ray's words, “a sacred member of (the) village ecclesiastical body of female *bratee*s” (Ibid, p. 14). No male Hindu priest is required for such worship.

The writer Shudha Majumdar describes the *bratas* of her childhood in twentieth century Calcutta. She recalls some of her early *brata* practices, with simple Bengali mantras and without priests:

The *tulsi* *brata* teaches the child how to care for the bush of sweet basil that is so dearly cherished in every Hindu home. The cow *brata* makes her familiar with the four-footed friend whose milk not only sustained her in infancy but is still an important item of her daily food. There is another delightful *brata* called *punyipukur*, or the lake of merit, in which the child digs a diminutive lake and, seating herself before it, prays to Mother Earth for the gift of tolerance and for the fortitude to endure all things lightly, as does Mother Earth herself (Mazumdar 1989).

Here as an example, we have a *brata* to an older Bengali form of the goddess Durga, in which she is goddess of the forest. It is taught by older women to young girls:

#### 4.2. The *Soubhagya-Chaturthi* *Brata*

This *brata* is performed at about the same time of the year as Durga puja, in the month of Ashvin (September–October), by newly married women and mothers. It commemorates a time when the goddess Durga blessed a devoted but unloved older queen, while the

younger queen who was proud and harsh had the land rebel against her. It shows the older ideas of divine kingship, in which the land reflects the ruler's virtues and sins (in this case, with some help from the goddess).

In this *brata* ritual, Durga is worshipped with a pitcher and with six large leaves of the arum tree. On one leaf, a necklace should be painted in ghee and on another leaf, some dough should be carved into a necklace. Durga is offered incense and prayers, as well as flowers, rice, and vegetables. Later the leaves are thrown into a river or pond. It is to be performed for four years, with the most elaborate worship of Durga in the last year. In this story, the goddess Durga reveals her own worship; the ritual is not part of a tradition handed down from the past. We may note that most of the drama is between the women:

#### *The Story of the Two Queens*

*There was a king in ancient times who had two queens: the So-rani and the Do-rani. The Do queen was the elder of the two, and the king did not love her. As she saw no other alternative, she went into the garden and took shelter in old cattle shed. There she would wear torn saris and sleep on ragged bedding. Yet the younger queen was still not happy, despite her participation in casting out the older queen from the palace. She wanted to exile the older queen from the country and cause her to live in some distant forest. However, all of the servants in the palace hated the younger queen, while they loved and admired the older queen.*

*The younger queen confided her idea of exiling the older queen to a servant, who informed the older queen about it. The older queen was very unhappy to hear about the conspiracy and sobbed throughout the day, and she lost her interest in food.*

*It was an auspicious day in the month of Ashvin, and the older queen fasted the whole day and fell asleep at night. Deep in the night, she had a vision; an extremely beautiful woman came up to her, wearing a red-bordered sari, and asked, "Why are you crying? Tomorrow is an important day, and I shall tell you what to do. In the morning, get up and bring two arum leaves from the side of the cattle shed. On one of them, you should draw a necklace out of pure ghee and above the leaf, put sugar as an offering. On another leaf, you should put a necklace molded out of dough and then put some dried uncooked rice on it as an offering. Then you should call upon Mother Durga with great devotion. Then cook some food and lay it on the arum leaf with the necklace drawn out of ghee. Then put these into the river. Do all of this with devotion, and your misery will disappear".*

*The older queen awoke early in the morning and bathed. Then she began to carefully follow the instructions from her dream. She did this for three years, yet her unhappiness remained. Despite her poverty, she never forgot to worship Mother Durga.*

*Meanwhile, the tyranny of the younger queen increased. She made the servants furious, and they complained to the king. A famine also broke out, and in the stables, the horses died, and in the elephant herds, the elephants died. The crops burned and died due to lack of rain. The inhabitants of the country also died due to the lack of food.*

*All of the ministers and people praised the older queen. The king heard this and found that everybody missed her. They began to say that the older queen was the Lakshmi (goddess of good fortune) for the kingdom and it was her departure which brought in the country's misery. Now there was no way to escape it.*

*In the fourth year, the older queen did her usual worship of the goddess Durga and with great devotion expressed her wishes to Mother Durga, and she cried a little. After that she gave offerings and then threw the empty leaves into the river. As she was returning, she saw the king approach her from behind a bush. She gasped upon seeing him. He smiled at her and lifted her up, and then he insisted that she come to the palace. The servants were happy to see her, and gradually the famine and problems within the kingdom subsided. There was rainfall again, and the land was fertile, and peace was restored.*

*The king called in the younger queen and said, "You were once very anxious to send the older queen into exile. Well, now it is your turn. Pack all of your belongings". The younger queen cried, but the king would not change his mind. The king called a soldier and told him to escort the younger queen into exile.*

*When the month of Ashwin came again, the older queen offered her worship with much devotion to the goddess Durga. The king heard the story of Durga's greatness with rapt attention. He then spread her worship throughout his kingdom and from there it went out into the world.*

*Any woman who performs this brata will live happily ever after. She will never have poverty or misery, and poor women who perform this brata can turn their luck around* ([Bhattacharya and Debi n.d.](#)).

The goddess Durga felt sorry for the ragged and rejected elder queen in this story, and she appeared to her in typical Bengali clothing (the red-bordered sari, usually in white cotton). She told the older queen how to change her situation, and the older queen obeyed her. The symbolic offering of jewelry to the goddess (the necklace made of dough) as well as the old queen's faith brings salvation and her husband's renewed love and respect to the forsaken woman. It took Durga a few years to change the situation, but patience brings reward. The ritual showed the dedication of the queen, and it was rewarded by the goddess.

While modern urban understandings of Durga portray her as a warrior, a heroine, and a force of virtue and morality, in her earlier form in the villages, she is Durga of the Forest, who can bring starvation, famine, and drought if she is displeased. In this case, while it is the king's sin which brings the famine, it is the wrong queen ruling that is bringing nature into disharmony. Durga supports the right queen, who is religious and virtuous, and the return of harmony with nature (making the land fertile and ending drought). For further detail on Bratas, see ([McDaniel 2003](#)).

We may note that village *bratas* are usually learned and practiced in all-female groups, while those performed in urban India are more often done individually. It seems that *bratas* become more brahmanical as they enter the towns and cities; they are performed to more male gods and often taught to girls by male brahmins and priests. Urban areas have more influence of institutional Hinduism and more availability of texts, many provided by male priests and pandits, who expect payment. As a recent Hindu website on *vratas* notes, "A *vrata* is incomplete if it does not involve giving (*dana*) at the end of it. If a priest performs the worship, he should be adequately compensated with a suitable fee (*dakshina*) as agreed in advance".<sup>13</sup> It further notes some *vrata* gifts for priests: "Tradition considers the following charitable gifts appropriate, cows (*godana*), bulls (*vrishabha dana*), land (*bhoomi dana*), house (*griha dana*), food (*anna dana*), agricultural tools (*hala dana*), fruit (*phala dana*), kitchen utensils (*apaka dana*), etc".

Village *bratas* which are taught by *ayes* encourage community among girls and women and demonstrate respect for young girls, married women, and old women, for there are rituals dedicated to each. The worship of young girls at Kumari puja is well-known, but here is worship that specifically includes older women, at which the *ayes* themselves may be appreciated:

"The ada-holud brata or the brata of ginger and turmeric is performed from the last day of the month of Chaitra to the last day of the month of Baisakh (roughly, the month of May) and should be continued for four years. It is the worship of fortunate women, who are called *ayes*. For this brata, such women may be of any age, but are often old. A woman whose husband is alive should be chosen, and she should be offered a handful of unhusked rice and of coriander, as well as five pieces of ginger and five of fresh turmeric. She should also be offered sweets (sandesh or small cheesecakes) and a small amount of money. The end of the fourth year is a time of celebration, and four auspicious wives should be invited. They should be feasted and given iron bracelets (*loha*, traditionally worn by Bengali wives), vermillion, a vermillion jar, alta paint (a red liquid for decorating the feet), a brush, and if possible, a sari and cloth. The original woman served should also be given iron bracelets twisted with gold and a fan, a sari, a comb, and more money. The goal of this brata is to guarantee that the woman who performs it will never be a widow" ([Bhattacharya and Debi n.d.](#), p. 25). She will then live a fortunate and happy life, like the wives worshipped.

In the *brata* rituals, the different stages of life are shown to be valuable in different ways. The rituals encourage artistic creativity in drawing *alpana* pictures, and modern

versions of the pictures may include social and political commentary. *Bratas* encourage respect for nature, with rituals that involve creating lakes and ponds, feeding hungry animals, and caring for miniature forests and groves. *Bratas* encourage concern for family members, especially for the husband and children. The stories encourage girls to overcome difficulties, by tales of suffering which is overcome by virtue. Some *bratas* show tensions and power struggles which are a part of daily life, and they give strategies for responding to them and insight into shared concerns. While *bratas* start out as a sort of play for children, other aspects become important as the girl grows up into a woman, guided by the *brata* priestess who influences her values and her life. However, with modern brahmanical influence, many girls learn of their future roles from men instead of women. This becomes a challenge in providing role models.

### 5. Female Influencers and the Shakta Bhakti Tradition

Devotion to the goddess or emotional Shakta bhakti first became popular in West Bengal towards the end of the eighteenth century. Goddesses such as Kali and Durga became understood as kinder and more benevolent, and the relationship between the goddess and the devotee became close and intense. This devotional *bhakti* can be found in both householders and renunciants. Retirement in India often includes celibacy, and many celibate wives have children who are grown and time to dedicate to worship of the goddess. Devotion may be shown in both group and individual styles.

In modern Shaktism, the goddess is both the Mother of the Universe and also the Ocean of Consciousness, loved as both finite and infinite, dwelling in the heart of the devotee. This is the state of *mahabhava*, the state of mystical perfection, which combines devotion and union with the Mother as *brahman*. The colloquial term *bhava* is short for *mahabhava* (the great or highest state), *devabhava* (a general term for divine state or state of unity with a deity), or *bhavavesa* (the state of being overwhelmed or possessed by *bhava*). *Bhava* combines possession and devotional love, allowing the possessed person to retain consciousness in the midst of the goddess' power and presence. It shows intense love of a deity, and a person's humility and willingness to submit to the goddess. The goddess is attracted by the woman's love and then comes down to be close to her.

Informants who had experienced this state described it as a penetration of the *atma* rather than the *jiva*, the divine soul rather than the human personality. The goddess' presence or power enters the soul, filling it with light and bliss during the time of the possession, bringing greater strength, concentration, and energy than the person had normally. The ordinary personality stayed in place as did the person's memory, but the soul was filled with the goddess' presence. The person's ordinary language, ideas, and memory were present, but the energy and will belong to the goddess. Thus, the person in this state could speak in the regional language and have knowledge of local concerns, but the motivation behind this awareness was divine.

For Archanapuri Ma, devotion to both guru and goddess is central. Archanapuri Ma has been head of an ashram in Jadavpur for many years, and she is a celibate member of a Ramakrishna lineage. She is a *sannyasini*, having ritually renounced the world, and a *brahmacharini*, who is educated in traditional Hindu philosophy and literature. Her guru Satyananda was originally Vedantin, but later became a devotee of Shakti in the form of Kali Bhavatarini. He performed tantric meditations and offered his own blood to Kali Bhavatarini, and he taught Archanapuri Ma many of these meditative and ascetic techniques. Satyananda admired her dedication to meditative practice, and he found in her the qualities of a spiritual leader. He also gave spiritual initiation to low-caste people, allowing them to become *sannyasins* and *sannyasinis*.

She was born into a large extended family and at the age of twelve years took initiation from Sri Thakur Satyananda of Siuri. He spoke a mantra in her ear while they were playing, and she became his disciple. He would spend all day in a devotional trance (*bhava*) worshipping the goddess Kali, and after a few years, she too would fall into *bhava*, becoming "lost in Thakur". These uncontrolled *bhavas* occurred continuously for several

years as she practiced meditation, prayer, and ascetic practices. When his disciples objected to his attention to her, he did tests showing that their minds were fused; when he hit himself in a room on one floor, she would show that she felt pain in the same place in another. As her disciples phrased it:

"When these trances occurred, Thakur had to leave his own meditation in order to care for her. The devotees began to grumble that she was disturbing Thakur and complained about her. Thakur became angry with these devotees one day and said, "I have taken her as my adopted daughter, so do not raise questions about her. I forbid the devotees to criticize her". Some of them suggested that she might be ill, but Thakur said angrily, "This is not a disease, it is a *bhava*. For your sake, I will do an experiment".

Archanapuri Ma was lying senseless upstairs, and Thakur brought a group of doctors and devotees into the house. He had one group sit in the room with her and the other sat nearby on the veranda. While Archanapuri Ma was unconscious with her eyes closed and her hands in fists, Thakur started striking his own body in different places. Whenever he struck his body, Archanapuri Ma put her hands on her own body and expressed pain. Her eyes were still closed, and Thakur was not within range of her sight. Yet the devotees could walk from the bedroom to the veranda and see the similarity of the gestures. For another experiment, he had groups of people synchronize their watches and take notes on her behavior while in trance. Thakur would make deliberate gestures, and she would echo them. She was upstairs in bed, while Thakur was downstairs. They noted the gestures and times and again they corresponded".<sup>14</sup> The disciples found this a convincing 'scientific' argument, and they ceased to complain about the attention that the guru paid to her. This worked to avoid the sort of dissatisfaction that might otherwise occur towards a female ashram head.

The visions and trances later developed into a permanent state, what Archanapuri Ma called *ekatmika bhava*, in which two souls are fused into one. This is based on the idea that the soul has two levels, a more superficial level or *jiva* and a deeper level or *atman*. The superficial identity of name and form may remain, while the deeper level of the self can be shared. Archanapuri Ma described her shared soul with Thakur Satyananda in some detail; they would have common thoughts, emotions, and dreams. She said that there were no longer two separate entities, but rather one center and one periphery. Their mythic roles can change; the guru may appear in dreams as the Mother in a red Banarasi sari, blessing her devotee, or the guru may take the form of the god Krishna in relation to the devotee as Radha. Over time, she would no longer fall into separate *bhavas*, for her ecstatic states had become continuous, and her soul was fused with the soul of her guru.

As Archanapuri Ma noted in an interview, her *ekatmika* relationship continued after the death of her guru. She would have to see him through the inner eye of love (*prema-caksu*) rather than with her physical eyes, but he was still present. He was her friend and guide, full of love and concern. He kept the ashram "floating in a current of joy", full of song and story. After his death she became leader of the ashram, for she was the chief disciple and spiritual daughter (*manasakanya*) of the guru, a special and unique status.

Archanapuri Ma's form of devotion was primarily towards her guru and the goddess, but also towards the members of the ashram.<sup>15</sup> Though Satyananda was an ascetic and Archanapuri Ma took *brahmacharya* vows, both emphasized the value of love of the community, especially through *seva* or service. For Archanapuri Ma, this love was not transcendent, focused only on the goddess, but rather interpersonal, towards the guru and the ashram members. She valued creativity; ashram members spoke to me of her compassion and concern for them and also stated that she had written forty-eight plays (mostly about saints) and three thousand songs.<sup>16</sup> The ashram was a friendly place, and it was welcoming to guests. They liked to read poetry, much of it on devotional yearning for the guru and goddess. As an example:

In the heart of your meadow path strewn with yellow leaves  
You had recognized that golden Lakshmi had come silently.  
In the fields and banks and pathways of this Bengal ...

Wrapped in sari ends colored like waters of the Ganges  
In the beauty of an adolescent girl ...  
I call mother ...  
But leaving footprints in the dust  
Mother alas has gone back silently (Puri 1976, slightly rephrased).

Archana Ma took renunciant (*brahmacharya*) vows at the age of fourteen and studied Sanskrit, Bengali literature, and Indian philosophy at the ashrama school. She finds celibacy necessary for both service and religious love (These interviews may be found in greater detail in (McDaniel 1989, pp. 113–14)). The ashram itself grew to include many core renunciants, trustees and teachers, as well as members. They have renunciant housing as well as housing for the poor. They put on plays and concerts, write songs and poetry, and express their love of the goddess and guru through drama and story. As the ashram's website notes, "To the devotees, Archana Maa is Mother Goddess Herself. To know Sree Satyananda, one must bow down before Archana Maa. By her renunciation, service, forgiveness, patience and love for all she unfolds her exemplary Divine life for the awakening of the consciousness of human beings".<sup>17</sup> We might compare her to a still center around which the life of the ashram revolves, both physically and online.

As a comparison to a secular situation, we might look at her role as guru of the ashram in relation to a royal one, let us say the Queen of England. Both have high status but also a lack of involvement in daily political and social disputes. Most of the Queen's powers are now exercised by her ministers in government, who implement the law under the power of the Crown, hence the phrase 'Her Majesty's Government'. The Queen has the power to appoint cabinet ministers and advisors as well as the Prime Minister and even declare war. She also has the ability to appoint such religious figures as bishops and archbishops, but she does not get involved in political disputes. In the ashram, the guru also appoints people to religious roles as well as secular roles such as secretaries, accountants, administrators, scholars, and fund-raisers. However, most importantly, the most contentious issues are delegated, so the guru is able to be separated from the fray, writing poetry, giving religious discourses, leading hymn-singing, and contemplating her own guru and goddess.

This largely avoids the widespread problems of ashram politics in India, which have been noticed by both devotees and anthropologists. Much energy has been placed into social welfare projects, such as classes in women's empowerment skills, a school for children (which includes classes in Sanskrit and yoga), housing for the homeless, a medical center for women and children, and a farm and classes in the arts for all ages.<sup>18</sup> Founded as Sree Satyananda Devayatan in 1976, it has been expanding into Sree Satyananda Mahapeeth, a religious community based on organic farming and charitable activity, which is also a center of culture and learning, a *mahapeeth* centered around a holy woman whose soul is linked to the founding guru.

In this case, we have a female leader of an ashram with both men and women, which is quite unusual in West Bengal (though we do find it in other areas of India). However, in this case, her role as an influencer came about through support of the male leader, who supported and defended her and found new ways to demonstrate his faith in her abilities. This may have been influenced by his Shakta tantric perspective, for it is easier to have female leaders in Shakta groups than in others. Archana Ma was able to inspire others, and the group continues to expand. The current goal is to create a college at the Mahapeeth based on Indian religious and cultural ideals to share the ideals of the ashram's founders.

## 6. Conclusions

These female influencers possess *shakti* in different ways. There is a range of possible relationships between the deity and the female worshipper and the worshipper and the community. Women may praise the goddess at a distance or the goddess may be recognized as a part of the worshipper, and such relationships may occur both individually and in groups.

The term “*shakti*” refers to both women and power. A person who is active, creative, and strong is said to possess *shakti*, and in such cases, it is valuable and respected. Both men and women may possess *shakti* in the sense of power, but men are not said to have the creative feminine *shakti* which gives birth to the universe and to living beings. Untamed *shakti*, which may be wild and destructive, is feared. A woman is respected for the degree and type of *shakti* she is understood to possess and also her ability to control it. Devotion to a goddess can help to tame a woman’s *shakti*, having it expressed as blessings and healings rather than curses or negative emotions.

Women may worship a goddess as a distant entity, who is given offerings and ritual worship. When the goddess is distant from the woman, her social standing is generally not much affected by the gender of the deity, for she will not participate in the *shakti* of the goddess. Worship at a distance will not affect social status; issues such as dowry or bride price will be much more important.<sup>19</sup>

However, if the woman becomes close to the goddess or merges with her, then she is understood to participate in the goddess’ power or *shakti*, and she is then generally respected and treated in a special way. This is the case with holy women of various sorts, but it is also seen in the houses of Shakta devotees. As one Shakta housewife in Kolkata told me, “*Shakti* is in my body, it is the way I speak and move my hands. It is the same *shakti* that moves the universe. All women express that *shakti*, that is why they are like the goddess”.<sup>20</sup>

Among the female religious influencers in this paper, we can see two styles through which these women gain status and legitimacy. We have the **charismatic** style, where women are called by gods and goddesses, often having to fight for their calling, and the **traditional** style, where women are helped by cultural values into gaining the roles of religious influencers. Under the charismatic style, we have here the Santal call from deities external to the culture and the Hindu call from deities who are internal to the culture, an accepted part of the religious pantheon. We may call the first charismatic type **supernatural adoption** and the second charismatic type **ancestral heritage**. We also have two traditional ways that women may gain the status of a religious influencer, through the **accepted folk tradition** of *bratas* and the **inheritance of power** from male authorities who support them.

Among the Santal people, direct female religious power is considered to be dangerous and is forbidden. Women cannot hold the power of the *bonga* deities. However, if a woman is called by a deity of a different group, in this case Hindu deities calling Adivasi women, then serving the deity is an acceptable role for women. This is legitimized by supernatural healings, which are understood to occur due to the deity’s power. While a priestess within the religion can be condemned and attacked as a witch, a woman called outside of the religion’s boundaries is in a more protected position. The Adivasi religious universe hesitates to attack the Hindu religious universe. Here we see a case of **supernatural adoption**, where a call from a deity within one pantheon becomes a charismatic call for a worshipper from another tradition. We may also note that, as Hinduism is more dominant in India than tribal religion, women who have such calls may gain higher social status among Adivasis.

A second way that a woman may become a religious influencer is through **ancestral heritage**, by a charismatic experience within her own religion, which involves obedience to a divine call from a recognized deity (usually a goddess). While this may be considered socially acceptable if the deity only wants extra *puja*, it must often be proved by a hard life and endurance of pain, especially through exorcism. Once the role is accepted by the community, there is a secondary level of proof, which is having successful trance states with a deity who gives blessings and useful information. She is then considered a reputable source of power and information, able to influence the community by stating the goddess’ wishes.

Such ‘prophetic calls’ must be proved in Bengali society; Hindu communities are familiar with false religious claimants or ‘*nakal sadhus*’. Girls have feigned possession to avoid unwanted arranged marriages, and there is always the possibility of supernatural

entities such as *bhutas*, *pretas*, and irritable ancestors taking over a vulnerable girl's soul. Families want their daughters married and giving them grandchildren, and a strong argument is necessary to get around this necessity.

Another way that a woman may become a female religious influencer in rural Hindu tradition is by becoming a teacher of *bratas* to young girls. Here an **accepted folk tradition** is handed down, often with local revelations by goddesses for the next generation. The proof of the legitimacy of the role is by parents who seek to have their daughters educated in this way and by bringing up a generation of young women who accept traditional values. The *aye* or teacher of *bratas* becomes a role model, thus an influencer very different than the male *pandit* who teaches *bratas* in the cities.

Finally, a woman may become a religious influencer by becoming a *guru*, especially the head of an ashram. This can happen by **inheritance**, when the leadership role is willingly given to a woman by a male leader. This is a traditional form of transfer of power. In the case described here, the male *guru* deliberately made his wishes known to the devotees by clearly naming his successor before his death. He also performed 'scientific' proofs that showed a shared consciousness between the *guru* and his *manasakanya* ('spiritual or mind daughter'). She became the meditative center of the ashram, inspiring music, drama, and the arts, much as her *guru* had done. She maintained a permanent emotional link to him and continued to communicate with him after his death. The issues of outreach, finances, and fundraising were left to disciples, who were happy to have the responsibilities.

We see female influencers in a variety of roles in West Bengali religion. Who is a female religious influencer? For this paper, a female 'influencer' refers to a woman who influences others, both personally and culturally. The most well-known female influencers in the West tend to focus on style (especially makeup styles, hair styles, and clothing styles), though there are many religious women with an online presence, especially the wives of prominent ministers. In India, there is a growing secular fashion presence, but these do not tend to be combined with religious values and ideals. Few Indian girls want to look like a *yogini* or *sannyasini* when they grow up; the interest in these roles does not focus on style.

Among the influencers we have examined, the charismatic and traditional styles of influencers tend to focus on different aspects of life. The charismatic influencers tend to deal with personal issues, counseling village women who have medical and familial problems that they do not wish to reveal to male strangers. Holy women of various sorts often function as informal psychologists in villages which do not have clinics and hospitals. They get their personal problems discussed and ideally a blessing from a goddess who can tell them the right way to proceed.

The traditional influencers tend to deal with groups rather than individuals. They may teach ritual practices to girls, showing them ideal perspectives and behaviors, and build institutions where women can renounce the world or go for shelter or help. The ashram described here is offering education and medical help and teaching practical skills to women, so they may have jobs and help to support their families. This is not unique to this ashram; there are many Hindu groups who are interested in following in the footsteps of Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Sarada Devi in building such organizations. Women associated with the ashram can choose the lifestyle they wish to pursue, whether householder or renunciant.

We can thus see a variety of traditional strategies by which women can become religious influencers within Bengali society. With the rise of the Internet, we also see more modern female gurus sending teachings to disciples through websites, online classes, and meditative retreats.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- 1 While the Bengali understanding of *budhi* or *budi* is “old woman”, the tribal understanding is “ancestress”, a woman not merely old but ancient and venerable.
- 2 This state was founded in the year 2000, originally under the name Vanachal. It has a high Adivasi population and includes areas that formerly were part of West Bengal.
- 3 See sarhul festival, sarhul celebration—Festivals Of India, 2022. <https://www.festivalsofindia.in/Sarhul-Festival> (accessed on 13 January 2023).
- 4 Parvati lives in a Santal village, where the huts are made of mud and thatch. A layer of liquified cow dung is placed on the dirt floor in order to purify the environment.
- 5 The term “bonga” often implies an intense and fearful attraction; the female genitals are sometimes called “bonga” by Santal men.
- 6 Boddington, P. O. *A Chapter of Santal Folklore* (title page missing), p. 51.
- 7 See Chaudhuri 1987, p. 97. It may be noted that the blame here goes entirely on the women, despite the fact that the daughter was understood to be possessed by a male *bonga*, who was responsible for her behavior.
- 8 “3 women beaten for ‘witchcraft’” by an unidentified staff correspondent, *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, dated 7 March 1994.
- 9 See Singh 2016. The article notes that the Rajya Sabha was informed in June of 2016 that 127 women branded as witches were killed in Jharkhand state between 2012 and 2014. According to police records, there have been 98 deaths and 1857 incidents of ‘witch-hunt’ from 2014 to June 2016 in the state.
- 10 Her biography written here is from field notes in Kolkata, where I interviewed her over the course of several weeks in 1984.
- 11 See the biographies of several such holy women in, for example, (McDaniel 1989).
- 12 For details of her life, see the description of Yogeshvari Devi in Chapter Five, *The Madness of the Saints*.
- 13 The Meaning and Significance of Vratas in Hinduism (hinduwebsite.com). <https://www.hinduwebsite.com/hinduism/concepts/vratas.asp> (accessed on 13 January 2023).
- 14 From field notes, interviews with Archanapuri Ma and several of her devotees, 1984.
- 15 At the time of the interviews, there were forty to fifty men and thirty women at the ashram, and all were renunciants. Many of the women were widows, and some spoke of how Archanapuri Ma was like a mother or sister to them.
- 16 Thakur Satyananda was also highly creative, and his disciples claimed that he had written sixty thousand songs. They published a series of books that included some of his writings.
- 17 See Maa Sree Archana—Sree Satyananda Mahapeeth [https://sreesatyanandamahapeeth.com/?page\\_id=30](https://sreesatyanandamahapeeth.com/?page_id=30) (accessed on 20 January 2023).
- 18 For further information on activities, see Activities—Sree Satyananda Mahapeeth—Sree Satyananda Mahapeeth [https://sreesatyanandamahapeeth.com/?page\\_id=18](https://sreesatyanandamahapeeth.com/?page_id=18) (accessed on 20 January 2023).
- 19 Dowry and bride price are the ways that Hindu families fund newlyweds. In the dowry system, money and gifts go from the wife’s family to the husband’s family, thus having a daughter means the family will lose much wealth. In the bride price system, the money goes from the groom’s family to that of the bride. Under the dowry system, sons are desired; under the bride price system, daughters are more valuable and wanted more than sons. Dowry is the dominant practice in urban West Bengal, but bride price can be found in rural areas, such as Purulia district.
- 20 Interview, Mrs. A. Sinha, 1994. Her husband has a great image of Kali in the house, as well as shrine pictures of the Shakta saints Vamaksepa and Ramakrishna Paramahamsa. Sinha spoke of his wife as the goddess and of Ramakrishna worshipping his own wife as an incarnation of the goddess.

## References

Archer, W. G. 1974. *The Hill of Flutes: Life, Love and Poetry in Tribal India; A Portrait of the Santals*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, p. 279.

Bhattacharya, Panditprabab Gopalcandra, and Rama Debi, eds. n.d. *Meyeder Bratakatha: Baromaser*. Calcutta: Nirmal Book Agency, pp. 102–4.

Carrin, Marine. 2018. *Children of the Goddess: Devotion and Female Priesthood in Bengal*. Delhi: Primus Books.

Chaudhuri, A. B. 1987. *The Santals: Religion and Rituals*. New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House.

Das, Upendrakumar, ed. 1383. *Kularnava Tantra*. Calcutta: Nababharat Publishers, vol. VII, pp. 47–49.

Mazumdar, Shudha. 1989. *Memories of an Indian Woman*. Edited by Geraldine Forbes. London: M. E. Sharpe, p. 17.

McDaniel, June. 1989. *The Madness of the Saints: Ecstatic Religion in Bengal*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, chp. 5.

McDaniel, June. 2003. *Making Virtuous Daughters and Wives: An Introduction to Women’s Brata Rituals in Bengali Folk Religion*. Albany: SUNY Press.

McDaniel, June. 2004. *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls, Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 47.

Puri, Sri Archana. 1976. *A Sheaf of Waves*. Calcutta: Sree Satyananda Devayatan, p. 34.

Ray, Sudhansu Kumar. 1961. *The Ritual Art of the Bratas of Bengal*. Calcutta: Firma KLM, p. 10.

Singh, Shiv Sahay. 2016. The ‘witches’ of Jharkhand. *The ‘witches’ of Jharkhand—The Hindu*, December 27.

Smrititirtha, Pandit Srinityananda, ed. 1388. *Kali Tantram*. Calcutta: Nababharat Publishers, vol. VIII, pp. 5–10.

Troisi, J. 1979. *The Santals: Readings in Tribal Life*. New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, vol. 1, p. 396.

**Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.